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Eminem Pushes Real Limits With Slim Shady LP

Detroit rapper's debut has already drawn criticism with its tales of rape, murder and illicit drugs.
By Gil Kaufman
Eminem's lyrics are provocative, potentially offensive and some would argue art -- modern day versions of Greek tragedies. To Eminem, at least, these raps make a point about the tragic comedy that is life.

And if it causes controversy in the process, well, then so be it, he said.

"There's a deeper meaning behind everything I say, making fun of all the f---ed up sh-- in the world," said Eminem, whose rapping voice wavers between a mocking whine and an exaggerated, off-kilter yelp. "It's comical sh--, but people will see that it is really political. I'm not a baby sitter or a role model. I never claimed to be any of that stuff."

The major label debut by rapper Eminem, *The Slim Shady LP*, kicks off with a jokey disclaimer about the tales of violent murder, mayhem, rape and drug taking that unfold over the course of the album.

"This is a public service announcement brought to you in part by Slim Shady," says the cheesy announcer at the outset. "The views and events expressed here are totally fucked, and are not necessarily the views of anyone, however the ... suggestions that appear on this album are not to be taken lightly.

"Slim Shady is not responsible for your actions."

What follows is a one-hour trip through the often violent mind of the 24-year-old Detroit rapper (born Marshall Mathers), who is the latest protégé of N.W.A founder and gangsta-rap icon Dr. Dre (born Andre Young). Just a week after its release, the album's graphic -- and, at times, horrific -- lyrics have resulted in a tersely worded condemnation from the editor of *Billboard* magazine and a strong reaction from several women's groups.

In songs such as the album's first single, (RealAudio excerpt), Eminem raps about dreaming that he slits his father's throat. A duet with Dre on "Guilty Conscience" finds various Eminem alter egos contemplating robbery, murder and the drugging/rape of a 15-year-old girl.

Expecting that his graphic rhymes might cause some controversy, Eminem took time prior to the album's release to describe the "Slim Shady concept" of his main alter ego as the "dark, evil, creatively sick part of me."

The rapper, who said he'd never met his father and had a seriously strained relationship with his mother, defended his often violent, misogynistic lyrics by saying that if he actually did any of the things he raps about he'd "be in jail right now."

Eminem said that, before the album's Feb. 24 release, he had excised lyrics in "My Name Is" that described raping lesbians and confronting an unwanted advance by a homosexual grade school teacher. Several of that song's profanity-laced rhymes and graphic situations are sanitized for the radio single and video version of the track.

"If something's on my mind, I'll say it," Eminem said, adding that he changed the lyrics to "My Name Is" at the behest of an unidentified gay activist. "To be honest, I don't have nothing against gay people ... The world will get offended when they listen to my sh--. I'm glad, because at the end of the day, I don't give a sh-- what I rapped about."

The lyrics to "My Name Is" and those of (RealAudio excerpt) drew mixed reactions from women's and anti-domestic violence groups. In the latter, Dre plays the part of a good angel trying to stop Eminem's character, "Grady," from committing the rape and shotgun murder of his unfaithful wife.

Judith Meuli, president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women, said she preferred to fault the label that promotes and distributes albums with such lyrics rather than the artist.

"I think about it the same way as prostitution," the 30-year NOW veteran said. "You shouldn't fault the woman [who prostitutes herself] ... but the people buying it and those that denied her a proper education and opportunities. The guy's just trying to make some controversy and sell records."

Eminem's label, Interscope Records, had no response to this story, according to a spokesperson for the rapper.

While cultural history has been rife with images of murder and familial violence (the patricide in the Greek myth "Oedipus," the murderous blues of the late Robert Johnson, etc.), an advocate for domestically abused women and children decried the rough images in Eminem's songs.

"I had a very visceral reaction [to the album]," said Kate Cloud, the executive director of Boston's, Respond Inc. "When we have a popular artist whose music is promoting the victimization and abuse of an intimate partner, it speaks very much to what we're trying to work against."

Cloud said she had not yet heard the album and was not aware of such songs as " '97 Bonnie and Clyde" -- wherein a husband under a restraining order dumps the body of his murdered wife at sea -- until she received a call last week from *Billboard* Editor-In-Chief Timothy White. The *Billboard* editor penned a repudiation of the album's content in the current issue of the music industry weekly.

Already a 10-year veteran performer at a relatively young age, Eminem had been toiling on the Detroit rap scene for more than five years before hooking up with Dre. Now, he is following in the footsteps of Dre's previous protégé, multimillion-selling gangsta-rapper Snoop Dogg.

Despite his protests, Eminem revealed a glimpse of his hard-nosed persona during a *SonicNet Music News* interview by promising to "go choke them motherf---ers" in a cell phone call about a personal business dispute.

The subject matter on *Slim Shady LP* ranges from the travails of an awkward teen in the song, "Brain Damage," to Eminem's self-description as a "sick, sick bastard" in "Cum on Everybody," to an endorsement of "[doing] acid, crack, smack, coke and smokin' dope" in "Just Don't Give a Fuck."

At the other extreme, Eminem described the melancholy rap ballad, "Rock Bottom," as embodying the fear and panic he felt just a year ago before his career took off. In the song, he frets about not being able to heat his house or provide for his daughter, to whom the album is dedicated.

It's "about all the scary sh-- that was going through my head ... when nobody had faith in me," he said.